DOCTOR WHO

OPUS ONE

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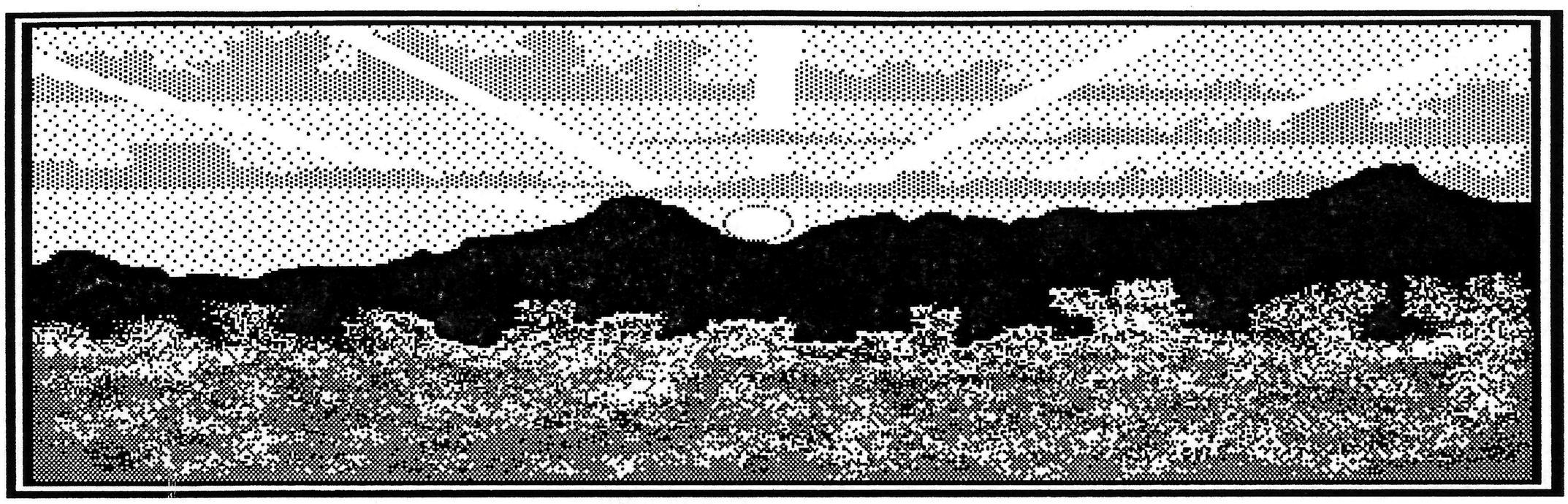


Hey and away we go
Through the grass, across the snow
Big brown beastie, big brown face
I'd rather be with you than flying through space.

I'd rather be on horseback.

Lyrics from "On Horseback" by Mike Oldfield, 1975

OPUS ONE



by Philip May

"There are worlds out there where the sky is burning, the seas sleep, and the rivers dream; people made of smoke, and cities made of song. Somewhere there's danger; somewhere there's injustice; and somewhere else the tea is getting cold. Come on Ace, we've got work to do . . ."

THE DOCTOR, *Survival*

* * * *

Sunrise. Rays of orange light wafted through the trees, and a gentle westerly breeze began to blow. The sound of hooves disturbed the peace. A horse, with a young woman riding it, trotted slowly over rolling green hills where dew had newly settled.

Suddenly the horse started to gallop at an incredible speed. The wind blew Ace's long brown hair, and she laughed so heartily it startled the sparrows. The sheer exhilaration of being on horseback banished all her worries. She never wanted to leave this place.

* * * *

A short distance away, a short man of middle-aged appearance pruned his roses. They were worse the wear, not looked after for a while. Apart from this, the Doctor's treasured garden looked the same as ever. Situated at the bottom of a flight of stone steps, it was covered with flora and fauna from many different times and places. In the middle stood a rock pool and a Gallifreyan statue.

The Doctor looked up and gazed once more at the sun. No matter where he went, no matter what sights he saw, nothing compared to this small planet named Opus 1. Apart from Earth, it was the closest thing to home. Many times in his childhood he'd come here with his parents.

He tried to recall his last visit. With Susan, before Totter's Lane? No, towards the end of his first life . . .

As the Doctor looked down, he saw a familiar purple rose staring up at him, practically winking with mischief.

He recalled the last time he saw that rose; his back giving in as he stooped to look at it; Polly helping him back to his feet. So much older he was then - or should that be younger?

The Doctor chuckled to himself, then returned to his work. By the cottage at the top of the steps, Ace tied her horse up. She then ran down to the garden.

"Time for breakfast, Professor?"

From a nearby barbecue came the smell of sausages and bacon cooking . . .

* * * *

Visiting Opus 1 was Ace's idea. The events and revelations of recent months, particularly the Fenric incident, weighed heavily on her mind. She told the Doctor she needed to go somewhere peaceful to reflect. But not Earth - they were bound to run into trouble!

For ages, the Doctor droned on and on about the Eye of Orion, but Ace thought it sounded boring. Luckily, after one night's particularly heavy drinking, he mentioned Opus 1.

His words were slurred, but Ace found herself captivated by the idea of a secret world that only the Doctor visited. And there were horses there, animals she'd loved ever since childhood. At first, the Time Lord was reluctant. He said it brought back too many memories of his granddaughter Susan . . .

* * * *

That evening, the sky looked magnificent. Opus 1 lies on the Milky Way's outer rim. Worlds there are peaceful, untouched by the tidal forces within. On a clear night, you can see the entire galaxy in the sky, like a giant Catherine Wheel suspended in space.

The Doctor pointed out a tiny, flickering star, and informed his friend it was Earth's sun. For a moment, Ace saw tears in his eyes.

He's more human than he admits, she guessed. *That's his secret.* The thought soon passed, so taken was she by the sight in the sky. A mixture of emotions washed over her:

awe, and a strange sense of insignificance. How small she was compared to the stars!

And yet, tinged with this was sadness. For an instant, her mind reached out to a future that could now never be. A vision filled her thoughts, that while she was on horseback, there was someone with her - a young, strong Russian soldier named Sorin. She imagined they were rolling in the grass, laughing, kissing and making love. Ace shuddered and clung to the Doctor for comfort.

"Why are there no people here?" she asked, steering her thoughts in different directions.

"Opus 1 wasn't designed that way," replied the Doctor.

"So who designed it?" Ace's curiosity was piqued.

"My father." The Doctor's answer seemed so simple. Yet as Ace looked into his eyes, she saw an emptiness there that burned deep into his soul. An unspoken question hovered over her lips: *What happened?*

The moment passed, and Ace felt sleepy. As the Doctor looked up to the stars, she sank into a warm, dreamless sleep . . .



* * * *

The pod hurtled through Space, its speed fantastic. A long time it had been out amongst the stars, and it was now as cold as the vacuum that surrounded it. But it still had its purpose. Its computer banks recalled the Ancient War. Before their defeat, the Great Old Ones swept through the galaxy, leaving a trail of devastation. The pod was lucky to escape. Too small to worry the Gods . . .

It hurtled through supernovas, flew past worlds burning in the fires of nuclear war. It even punched holes in spacecraft that blocked its way. Nothing would stop it carrying out its task: to find a world where its children might live, and enjoy the smell of fresh air.

And then, after an eternity of wandering, the impossible happened. Out here, on the galaxy's edge, it found the future. Filled with joy and the sounds of its computers shutting down, it prepared to dive into an atmosphere that had known no disturbances.

In the oceans, only the dolphins detected the invader's arrival. The wise ones of the sea jumped into the air. Their high-pitched voices screeched with a fury seldom seen on Opus 1. They knew the truth; their days were now numbered.

When the pod plunged into the water, it felt like a martyr. It was dying so that its kind could be reborn. A phoenix rising from the ashes of the Ancient War. The pod crumbled, and from its centre emerged a glowing, golden cone-shaped object as beautiful as anything metallic could hope to be.

Tentatively, it explored its new territory, like a new-born calf faltering to its feet. But there was no mother. The child was all alone in a wilderness of water, but knew that there would soon be others like itself swimming in the water, rejoicing in life. With its acute senses, it heard something far in the distance. Birdsong . . .

* * * *

Next morning, Ace swam in the most wonderful ocean she had ever known. The water felt so warm next to her skin. The scarlet diamonds of her swimsuit glistened in contact with the sunlight and water.

From miles around, the fish swam to see the lovely sight now sharing their ocean. For a brief moment, Ace wished there was somebody with her, but swiftly dismissed it from her mind. She waved at her mentor.

The Doctor watched from the overhanging cliff where he sat. He recognised the growing maturity of his young companion.

When I first met her, he thought, *she was an impetuous child. Controlled by forces beyond her understanding. Now she's growing up, and not ashamed of it. She'll soon be gone, having found a younger mentor.*

Thoughts of Susan filled his mind with regret. *"One day I shall come back," I promised you. I never did, did I? But I will visit you, Ace.*

The sound of her voice disturbed the Doctor's daydreaming. His companion was calling out to him, pointing at something floating in the sea. Throwing caution to the wind, he dived into the ocean from his vantage point, displaying seldom seen high-diving skills. The wind carried away his beloved hat.

Upon splashdown, he regretted it. *I'll wear this body out if I keep on doing Superman impressions.* He then saw Ace swimming towards him. Near her was a golden cone.

"I knew this place was too good to be true!" she spluttered.

As ever, the Doctor approached the problem straightforwardly. First he slowly swam towards the cone, to check it wasn't hostile. Then he reached out and grabbed the cone in a sudden movement.

"Back to the ship," he said after retrieving his hat.

* * * *

Following her shower, Ace entered the TARDIS laboratory to see what the Doctor was up to. She found him hard at work connecting a variety of instruments, including a pair of loudspeakers, to the cone.

"Listen to this," he said before he switched the speakers on. From them came a sound like an electronic heartbeat. As the Doctor moved closer to the cone, it became faster, like a racing pulse.

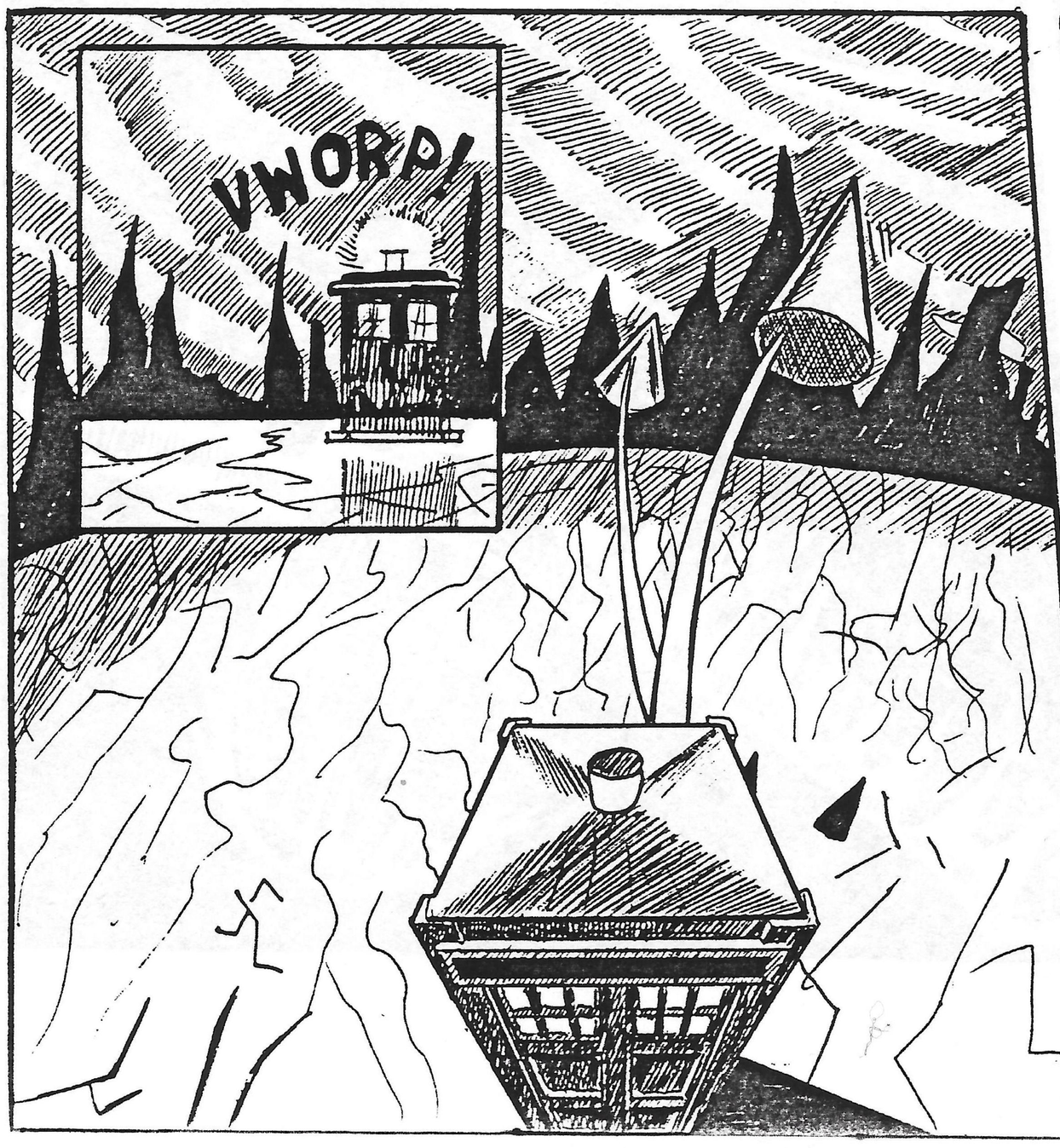
"I don't think that's a programmed noise," explained the Doctor. "I have a hunch that this cone thing . . ."

The sound of the cone crying out as if in ecstasy interrupted him. From deep within its heart, a bolt of fire shot out. It finally solidified as another cone, identical but most definitely the junior. It flew around the four corners of the room, before settling into the company of its parent.

". . . is alive!" finished the Doctor.






VWORP!



"But they're just machines!" exclaimed Ace with disbelief.

"Miracle of the Universe, Ace. Evolution takes many forms."

"But how did it get here, then?"

"Full of questions today, aren't we?" The Doctor began to pace around the room, deep in thought. "The first was probably the last of its kind, sent here to revive its species. Must have been an embryo. Suspended animation, wandering for millennia."

As the Doctor said these words, Ace could hear a new music in the air. Not the sweet sound of birds singing, but something metallic and heavy. The music of machines waging war. What would Opus 1 become? She turned to her mentor.

"We can't leave it here, Professor!"

"I know."

* * * *

The TARDIS appeared on a barren planet light-years away. The doors swung open, and the two golden cones flew out. A wail of ecstasy and a flash of light heralded the birth of a third cone.

"Will they be all right?" asked Ace, as she and the Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS.

"I should think so," replied the Doctor "This world is full of potential. Come on Ace, we have other places to visit."

As they returned to the huge, newly reconfigured, Jules Verne-style console room, the Doctor cocked his head to one side and gestured for his companion to be quiet.

"What is it?" Ace asked.

"The Time Lords," he explained. "A telepathic message. They say the Master's been put on trial and sentenced to death . . . on Skaro!"

"The Daleks?" asked Ace. "But you destroyed them, right?"

"Before that," replied the Doctor. "This is all very strange. The Master's final wish is that I take his remains to Gallifrey. I must go to Skaro . . ."

"Why bother?" asked Ace. "That Master was a right scumbag."

The Doctor fixed her with a stare. "Because we *were* friends once; a long time ago. It'll be dangerous; the Daleks won't exactly be co-operative. I must go alone."

"No way!" declared Ace. "I'll bring my Nitro-9 with me. It'll be a piece of cake."

"It's not just the trip to Skaro. I'll be going to my home planet afterwards; they don't allow outsiders there. No, this is something I must do by myself."

"I have an idea, then. Just drop me off somewhere, and come back for me later."

"Where were you thinking of going?"

"Opus 1 again - where else!" Ace grinned, then put her hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "Just take care - OK?"

"I'll try to," replied the Doctor. Sadness fell over his eyes, and Ace thought he had never looked older.

Alone, thought Ace. *We're born alone; we die alone; we spend our entire lives trying not be alone . . .*

* * * *

Sunset. As Ace lay back in the grass and watched the stars come out, she felt worried. The Doctor had been gone several weeks. Where was he? What was taking him so long?

As if on cue, the familiar wheezing groaning sound pierced the still night air. It was the TARDIS!

He's back, thought Ace, *and it's about time!*

Sure enough, the blue box clunked into existence and the doors began to open. Any second now, the amiable little Scottish-accented man would step out. He'd be wearing that stupid question-mark sweater, rolling his Rs, and wanting to whisk her off on more adventures.

It was not the Doctor.

"Hello, Ace. It's good to see you again. Sorry I'm late."

She'd heard about regeneration, had even taken it for granted. The Doctor constantly spoke of it, preparing her for a moment like this. But the reality of it came as a complete shock.

Stood in front of her was a complete stranger: a tousle-haired man in his mid thirties, dressed like Wild Bill Hicock. He smiled at her with recognition.

"Who are you?" Ace stepped back. She knew the answer, but wanted it confirmed.

The stranger grabbed her by the shoulders, shook and hugged her. He even kissed Ace on the cheek, which was distinctly odd. *Her* Doctor never did anything like that.

"I am the Doctor!" The stranger's voice boomed, and his eyes lit up with the joy of life. Finally Ace warmed to him. She smiled, and a tear ran down her cheek.

"He's dead, isn't he?" asked Ace. "The Professor, I mean."

"In a way, but he also lives on. It's not really death, just a . . . renewal."

"What happened?" Ace knew that something terrible must have happened to trigger off a regeneration. Was it the Daleks? The Master? Or worse?

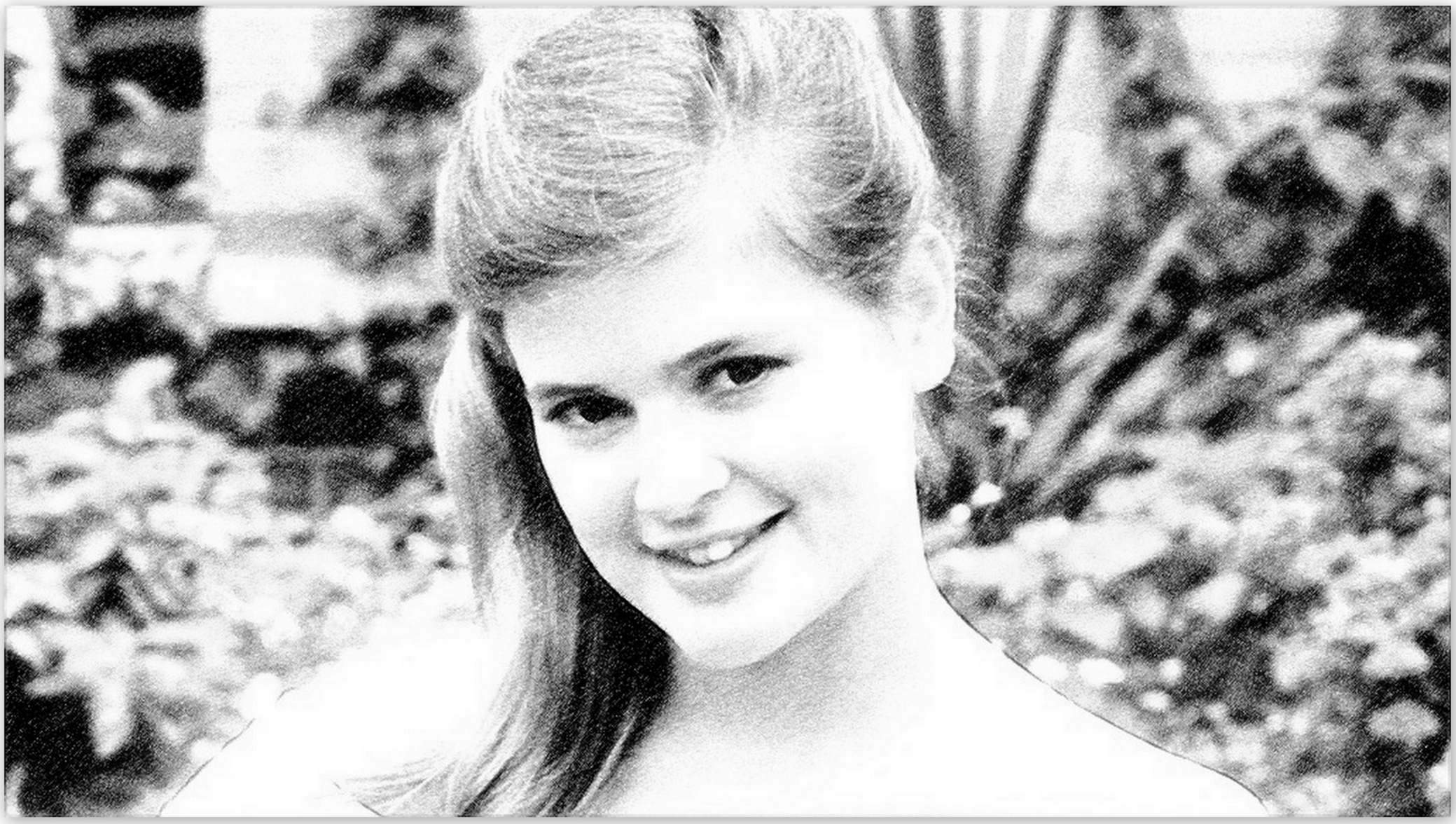
"It's a long story," replied the new Doctor, smiling. He looked so young. Ace heard music - opera - coming from inside the TARDIS. One of the Time Lord's favourites: Puccini's *Madam Butterfly*.

As Ace looked at the stranger, she decided that she did not belong with him. He was nice enough, but the Doctor she knew, who'd been like a father to her, was gone forever. She would miss him.

Her eyes began to water. The Doctor moved to wipe them with his handkerchief, but she moved away instinctively. And she found herself saying something once unimaginable.

"Take me home."

THE END



They leave.

Because they should or because they find someone else.

And some of them, some of them . . . forget me.

I suppose in the end, they break my heart.

THE DOCTOR, "The Next Doctor", 2008

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Opus One" was originally written in 1991 - whilst I was still in school!

It originally appeared in fanzines produced by local Doctor Who SF groups in Cardiff and Newport.

This "digitally remastered" PDF version is scanned in from a version which appeared in my self-published fanzine Crossover in Spring 1996.

It had additional material added to the end, to tie it into the then imminent TV movie starring Paul McGann.